THE ONE WE FOLLOW IS FAR AHEAD
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Psalm 40:1–8
Mark 2:1–12
Isaiah 43:14–21

"Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth,
do you not perceive it?"
Isaiah 43:18 (NRSV)

No doubt about it, religion is often religion's own worst enemy.
The tension between religion at its best and religion at its worst
drives people from church to church, searching for authenticity.
It drives them, as well, from the God of the institution
to the God of the spirit within. When religion makes itself God,
when religion gets between the soul and God,
when religion demands what the soul deplores—
a division of peoples, diminishment of self, and closed-mindedness—
religion becomes the problem. . . .
But religion at its best anchors us to the best in ourselves.
It enables us to find meaning in life.
It sets the human compass toward home.
It raises our sights beyond ourselves.

Joan Chittister
Called to Question

Startle us, O God, with your truth.
Open our hearts to your grace and hopeful love,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well, some of the latest market trends in our country pretty much fly in the face of that wisdom and instruction from the prophet Isaiah.

> Do not remember the former things,
> or consider the things of old.

The *Tribune* last Thursday reported that remembering the former things and considering the things of old is precisely what we're doing a lot of these days. The headline on page 2 announced, "Turning back the clock on toys, parents seek vintage comforts." The article explained how more and more parents are seeking the simple toys, furniture, and accoutrements of the past for their children: Tinkertoys, tasseled curtains, and Mother Goose illustrations on bedsheets. There is now a niche business reporting brisk sales in toys and nursery furnishings modeled after styles from the 1950s and earlier. A psychologist suggests that parents are trying to create cocoons that are more child friendly than twenty-four-hour news, terrorism, and technological overload not to mention violent video games, crude music, and explicit sex. The owner of a highly successful web-based business "Baby Goes Vintage," which specializes in windup ducks and Little Bo Peep prints, observed, "It can't be a coincidence that all these companies are introducing cars that look like old cars." Auburn University professor Ellen Abell thinks that adults who are unable to slow down and control their own lives are trying to exercise some control over their child's room. "I think all of us, a little bit, want to bring back our childhood somewhat," she said.

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The situation is this: God's people—actually just a remnant of a once-proud and independent and strong nation—are living in exile, under house arrest essentially, hundreds of miles from their homes, in the capital city of the Babylonian empire. They've been there, in fact, for decades, but they still can't believe what happened. Their proud army was defeated, their beautiful capital city destroyed, their holy temple, the very heart of their culture and national life, leveled, a smoking pile of rubble. And then instead of slaughtering everybody, the Babylonian army rounded up the survivors, particularly the prominent leaders of the community, and forced them to march all the way across the desert to Babylon, where they were kept in captivity. And it doesn't take much imagination to understand how much of their time those exiled, captive people spent thinking about the good old days, remembering the former things. It doesn't take much imagination to understand how incredibly important the past became for those people, how desperate they were to remember and to tell the stories of how it used to be, to tell their children and their grandchildren, who, after all, never walked the streets of Jerusalem and never saw the glorious temple. I'll bet they did it every single night, particularly the grandparents—told the stories of how it used to be, maybe became a little teary and sang an old song or two, until their grandchildren rolled their eyes at one another and one of them said, "Grandfather, we know the story. You've told it before, many times."

It must have come as a rude slap in the face to those people when a letter arrived from back in Jerusalem. There were some people still living there amidst the rubble. One of them was recognized as a prophet, a mystical poet who spoke for God. We don't know his name. His letter begins at the 40th chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah.

He is very important in the history of religious thought, theology, human reflection on the nature of God. As a matter of fact, the scholars who spend their lives examining ancient texts and manuscripts, digging through archeological sites, poring over ancient documents, conclude that this period in Israel's history, the Babylonian exile, is the pivotal time, the most important time of all, because of what God's people learned about God and themselves and history and how God can be trusted to relate to God's people.

We hear the prophet's words a lot in Advent. He writes so beautifully:

> Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. . . .
> A voice cries: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. . . .
> Get you up to a high mountain, O Jerusalem. . . .
> He will feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms.

Those are words we read every time we baptize an infant. We turn to his words when we face uncertainty, threat, illness, death:

> Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
> they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
> they shall run and not be weary,
> they shall walk and not faint.

The writer makes a dramatic announcement: God is about to act. God is not dead, as some suspected. God is a player still. God had not abandoned them as they all suspected occasionally. God is about to intercede. The people were set free, in fact. The Persians defeated the Babylonians, and the first thing the Persian leader, Cyrus, did was send the Jewish captives home. What does the prophet want from those exiled people wallowing in nostalgia, pining away for the good old days? He wants them to stop it, to be watchful, alert, hopeful. He wants them never to give up their dreams. He wants them to be ready to act. God is about to do a new thing. "But you are so preoccupied with the past, so obsessively focused on the good old days, you're going to miss it."

We understand now that one of the ways people deal with threat is avoidance, by looking backward instead of forward. Ever since September 11, 2001, we know that one of the ways people deal with the threat to all

that is stable and certain, the threat that rapid change involves, is to look to the past, to hold as tightly as possible to the former things.

In the midst of all the ambiguity and uncertainty about the war in Iraq—whether or not we should have initiated it, whether or not there was reason, whether or not our government told us the truth, whether or not we are winning, succeeding—who doesn't long for the straightforward simplicity of the 1940s? We can't get enough of it, it seems, and I suspect part of the reason is that, from our perspective, it all seems so uncomplicated. There were enemies to be defeated and we defeated them. Today we're not even sure who the enemy is.

The dynamic is particularly important for religion and for the church, precisely because religion is what a sociologist called a "zone of stability" in a threatening, changing world. One thing you can count on in the church, or synagogue or mosque, is that things don't change much. And yet things have changed dramatically for us in the past fifty years. In his fine book *The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism*, Martin Marty examines the dramatic changes that have occurred around and within the traditional mainline churches in America. We used to "run the show," Marty says. Presbyterians and Episcopalians dominated business, industry, the law, government. When the national media covered religion, it was us they covered. Our media profile high point came when the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, Eugene Carson Blake, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in the '60s for proposing a union of all the major Protestant churches. That's not likely to happen again. Religious media stars are very different today. Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, T. D. Jakes—not a Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist among them.

The world has changed. Our culture has changed. The traditional old churches, Walter Brueggemann says, are in a kind of exile, and Walter reminds us that it's not a bad place to be, that God seems inclined to exiled, sidelined, captive people. The danger, as always, is that we'll be caught looking backward, expending all our energy and resources in a desperate attempt to create the good old days; fighting one another, blaming one another—the politics of "nostalgia and resentment," Marty calls it.

I've been thinking about Abraham Lincoln this week, as I always do when we observe his birth date. I pulled a few Lincoln books from the shelf and skimmed and found one of my favorites: his message to Congress, December 1, 1862. It's one of his longest speeches, not one of his best. It rambles on and on and deals with a lot of numbers, until at the end. The war was not going well. It was one month before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which, he knew, would forever change the soul, the history, and the future of the nation. Lincoln said at that uncertain and frightening moment:

> The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves. And then we shall save our country.

Lincoln thought like a theologian, like an Old Testament prophet, with a sophisticated sense of the mystery and transcendence of God. And he sounds very much like the prophet when he asks Congress and the American people to disenthrall themselves from the past and think anew about the future.

When I was learning to drive long ago, my father taught me an important lesson. There are a lot of hills and mountains in the part of Pennsylvania where we lived. You never know on a winding mountain road what you might encounter around the next curve. My father told me that new drivers are so nervous they focus on the road immediately in front of the car. He told me to lift my sights and keep an eye on the road as far ahead as I could see. That way you can both keep the car on the road but also see what's coming.

Not bad advice.

> Do not remember the former things,
> or consider the things of old.
> Behold, I am doing a new thing.

Douglas John Hall, Canadian theologian, has written for a long time about the changing landscape for the churches in North America. He calls it the end of Christendom, the cozy arrangement, centuries old, between Christian faith, the church, and the culture. It's over, Hall says. The culture has turned radically secular in front of our eyes, and we suddenly are not at the center of things anymore. But Hall reminds us the end of Christendom is not a tragedy to be lamented but an opportunity to be embraced. The churches, Hall proposes, are free to be what Jesus Christ calls them to be, namely communities of compassion and integrity and justice where something of God's love can be seen and experienced, not just keepers of tradition and ceremony.

In the meantime we continue, and will continue, to live in a world of rapid change, and the temptation will always be to resist change by holding desperately to the past.

> "Behold, I am doing a new thing," the prophet said.
> "Now it is about to spring forth. Do you not see it?"

We have, of course, been talking about hope—the quiet confidence that God will be in the future, whatever it is for us, that a merciful and gracious and loving God will be actively a part of whatever future we encounter. This hope is not resignation, not just sitting around waiting for God to act. Augustine said hope has two lovely daughters, Anger and Courage: anger at the way things are; courage to change them. People of hope are always ready to act, to join God in recreating the world. Hopeful people change the way things are.

I love the way John Taylor, a British theologian puts it: "There are two ways of looking at time. Is the source of time (translate that God) . . . is God behind us, pushing us from history into the future? Or is the source of time —God—ahead of us, pulling us out of history into the future—so that the present always has within it the seeds of hope?" (*The Go-Between God*).

We are this morning midway between Christmas and Easter. As Christians, those two occasions are the ground of hope and the source of courage for the future.

We celebrated at Christmas the promise that God comes into the world, into human life, in ways that are quiet, small, easy to miss but as real and warm and accessible as the birth of a baby. And we move toward Easter and the promise that in Jesus Christ there is no reason to be afraid of anything in the present or future, not even our own death, no reason to desperately hold on to the past, every reason in the world to embrace the future, our personal future, because of the promise that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Douglas John Hall, whose thinking has been important and helpful to me and whose friendship has meant much to me, is a distinguished professor at McGill University in Montreal. He continues to teach and write and travel and lecture well into his seventies now. Not long ago, on the eve of a family vacation in France, a routine physical turned up a dangerous malignancy. It appeared that he was in serious trouble. So he cancelled the vacation, checked into the hospital, submitted to surgery and extensive and grueling chemotherapy. And happily is healthy again.

But in the midst of the experience, when the outcome was not at all certain, when the future appeared very grim, in fact, when it seemed that his life might be ending, he wrote a kind of spiritual memoir: *Bound and Free*. He looked back and remembered how he came to be a Christian and a minister and then a teacher, a theologian.

As he faced the uncertainty of his own future and the literal threat to his own life, he wrote about "The Journey Ahead." Thinking about the church, he wrote, "Journey is an excellent metaphor for a movement that

understands itself as people ‘on the way,’ en-route, in transit. . . . Like our parents in the faith we Christians all too soon exchanged tents for houses. How very settled we have been—and for so long. We’ve practically lost the knack for travel.”

And then, out of the uncertainty and fear of his personal future, he wrote these words, which I found deeply moving: “But the One whom we try to follow when we are attentive to our calling is far ahead of us. He is already facing the dangers of the way we are trying so hard to avoid.”

The one we follow is far ahead of us calling us into the future.

> Do not remember the former things,
> or consider the things of old.
> I am about to do a new thing;
> now it springs forth,
> do you not perceive it?

Thanks be to God.

Amen